

# the Sisterhood of Solidarity

Read on for a bit of inspiration, then gather up your own circle of friends, start a new girls-only tradition, and enjoy what is long overdue – time for you.

by Rebecca Walden  
Photography by Beau Gustafson

**T** rue to our Paleolithic roots, we 21st century ladies are still, at our core, gatherers in every sense of the word. We take great pride in caring for our nest and those who dwell in it.

But there comes a time when even the most motherly goose, to avoid becoming a total birdbrain, must occasionally fly the coop.

So, resorting to what we know best, we seek out a few like-minded friends, gathering together for a little self-nurturing, and maybe even for a bit of note swapping on whose spouse most deserves the award for “Cro-Magnon of the Week.”

It is in that spirit of therapeutic sisterhood that one long-established, and two not so long-established, casual women’s social groups have developed.

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## The Main Dishes

Forged out of a common love for the uncommon recipe, eight Over the Mountain moms launched The Main Dishes in July of last year.

These self-proclaimed foodies—all of whom like to mix up weeknight family staples (think chili and spaghetti) with the unusual (fried peanut butter ravioli or choc-

olate crème brulee sandwiches, anyone?)—allow their choices to be guided by one cardinal rule: Just say no to cream cooking soups.

Since most of their “gotta try” recipes are far too sophisticated for palates of the 10 and under set (and for some husbands), these ladies carve out one Thursday a month to meet in one of their homes, assembling an impressive array of appetizers, mains, desserts and aperitifs, and then enjoy a gourmet lunch that regularly sets their gastronomic senses soaring.

Founding member Amy Jason had long considered the idea of starting a foodie group. “I wanted it to be a group that shares my love of food and whose members would be game for trying more complicated, challenging recipes. No chicken tetrazzini!” When she mentioned it to her friend Kate Wheeler, a food tester for *Southern Living* magazine, word quickly spread to a few others for whom cooking is a labor of culinary love, and The Main Dishes came to life.

According to Sara Robicheaux, “Most people these days look upon cooking as a chore or obligation, so it is great to find a group of women who share a passion for actually being in the kitchen.” Mother of three Robicheaux works full time as Dean of the Business School at Birmingham-Southern. “[Being a part of The Main Dishes] gives me one whole day each month to take off of work and focus on my love of baking. Baking has always been my stress relief, and when things at work get hectic, I cannot wait

to get to the weekend and spend it making bread, cinnamon rolls, pretzels, cookies or biscuits.”

The group loosely builds its monthly menu around broad themes, given what fresh ingredients are in season, or the particular needs of an individual member.

Their most recent theme was wedding food, at the request of member Anita Turner, who would soon be hosting a bridal shower for one of her relatives and needed ideas. The Main Dishes did not disappoint, presenting a delicious assortment of temptations, from Creamy Shrimp Crostini to Deviled Eggs with Curry and Arugula Basil Mango Prosciutto Wraps.

And while you’d never find a member show up with such basics as hamburger stroganoff or chicken casserole, the women are mindful to keep their culinary efforts in perspective.

“It really isn’t about being impressive,” Robicheaux says. “It is more about us having an opportunity to make a recipe that we have wanted to make and just never had the right occasion. It is also about having a ready set of critics to help you determine what might need to be changed or improved in a recipe.”

“I really try to make something that is somehow a little different than what anyone has had before,” according to Jason, whose blood-orange mimosas made quite a splash at their last luncheon. “They were not any good—way too sour! But we discussed what could make them better next time.”

With eight gregarious personalities presiding over an even larger number of dishes both savory and sweet, the conversation is as lively as the meal itself.

While complimenting and critiquing each other’s selections, they animatedly trade stories and tips about everything from where to buy the best whole grain bread to the benefits of cooking with honey versus nectar to how to find unusual ingredients, such as fresh vanilla beans or strawberry extract.

“I love the social aspect of it as much as the food and new recipes,” Kylie Watson says. “I’m inspired by the creativity of each of my chef friends and their eagerness to seek out interesting dishes. We all enjoy good food and are not afraid to sacrifice our waistlines for an afternoon of pure indulgence and gluttony!”

“I love the bond that we have because of our passion for food,” Jason says. “We are all in the same place as far as wanting to eat healthy, making things our family will eat, saving time in the kitchen and being economical, but this one day a month kind of throws all that out the window. It is very skill enhancing and energizing, and the very best ‘meal’ of the month without a doubt. We are all delighted to try something someone else made, and we’re very forgiving of any failures, but we still learn from those, too.”

They also come to each other’s kitchen conundrum rescue, as was the case recently when Robicheaux and Jason painstakingly worked to master a “real” caramel cake.

“After four failed attempts, I called my high school math teacher,” Jason recalls. “She’d given me a lesson about 20 years ago, but I was too young to attempt it then. This time, she walked me through it, and my fifth attempt was perfect! After I mastered it, I called Sara spur of the moment to see if she wanted to come over later that day and make one alongside me. Her attempt was not perfect, even though she was doing exactly what I was doing. That tells you how hard it is to master the real deal.” Happily, the recipe mishaps are few and far between the successes, many of which have become a sort of “greatest hits” that have begun to define the group.

Robicheaux’s favorite new recipe was Kate Wheeler’s summer squash soup. “It was a recipe that I never would have tried,” she



says. But when she made it, it was delicious ,and my family loved it.”

“I still can’t wait to try the mocha ice cream that Sara made last summer,” Jason says. “It was to die for—nothing better at any restaurant in Birmingham!”

### Swap and Shop

Blending the delights of food and drink with fashion, Traci Lipscomb of Cahaba Heights dons her apron strings and hostess hat each spring for her annual Swap and Shop, now in its fourth year.

The annual event calls for guests to bring one gently used apparel item or accessory, and then swap it for another item from the night’s always-impressive inventory, where labels from high-end boutiques and brands such as Banana Republic and Ann Taylor are the norm.

“The fact that we love clothes means we have great stuff,” Lipscomb says. “Some items may even still have tags on them. Whatever it is, it might be perfect for another girl. It can get a little competitive, but it’s also supportive too. People will say, ‘Hey, I know you’ve had your eye on this, and it doesn’t work on me. Try it.’”

For Lipscomb, who over the years has often found herself on the receiving end of calls from friends wanting to raid her closet, hosting a fashion forward party was second nature.

“Girlfriends often call me up and say, ‘I have a function. Can I shop in your closet?’ And I think, why not get more use out of it? It may be something I’ve worn once. I’m more than happy to help them.”

Ever the entertainer, Lipscomb continues to improve the event, delivering a more engaging experience to her guests year after year.

From a relatively tame event with one clothing rack and not much swapping going on at the inaugural party, to last year, where guests got to have their colors done by a MAC rep while waiting in line for “fitting rooms,” Lipscomb’s Swap and Shop has become the spring must-attend event for an ever-enlarging circle of friends.

“At this point in our lives, a lot of us, especially those who are stay at home mommies, can feel like we never get glammed up anymore,” Lipscomb says. “With the MAC artist, he just went all out and taught us dif-

ferent makeup application techniques. He did the whole smoky eye thing for some of the girls. This evening has become something of a treat for all of us.”

“That first year, outside of the invitation I sent, no one had heard much about it and they didn’t quite get it,” Lipscomb says. But now, the ones that have been there before know what it involves, and each year they get more creative about what they will bring.”

That creativity includes the hostess herself, who overlooks not the slightest detail, each year serving up tasty appetizers and exquisite libations to entertain the swap-shop-pers-to-be.

“Most of my friends are great fashionistas and love clothes,” Lipscomb says. “Most of us either are career women now or we were in the past. We’ve had babies, our weight has fluctuated, and we’ve got all these great suits from our business life and they don’t fit anymore.”

**T**hat’s when Lipscomb got the idea to expand the purpose of the party from purely social to partly philanthropic and started asking friends to bring donations for My Sister’s Closet, a professional clothing assistance program sponsored by the YWCA. The first year, Lipscomb received only a few bags. She now devotes (and fills) an entire bedroom of her home to donations from partygoers.

Lipscomb, an eyewear rep for Nicole Miller and Michael Stars, will donate several pair of sunglasses to this year’s event. She has also invited some of her friends who are small business owners to participate as vendors. This includes Mindy Arnett, part-owner of the Kenzie Blake clothing line, who will bring some of the label’s samples to Swap and Shop 2011.

“I love having other women there that have their own things going, that are out there making it work,” Lipscomb says. “It can be inspirational to other women and also helps us remember why we are there.”

From elevating a mundane task like meal prep into a delicious time to be with friends, to quite literally sharing the clothes off our backs, and in the process reaching out to sisters in need, it is our natural tendency and a soul-nourishing endeavor to gather together. In so doing, we are greater than the sum of our parts, and there is perhaps no other

group that can represent this notion more elegantly than the ladies of the S and B.

### Stitch and Bitch

What originally began back in 1981 as a smocking club for several young mothers from Trinity United Methodist has since evolved into a family unto itself.

“We were originally all members of the same Sunday school class,” Nancy Driskill says. “We started it because we were all stay-at-home moms and we wanted a night out. I think we thought we had to justify it, which is where the sewing came in. We had no idea what it would develop into.”

There is indeed a Mama Bear mentality about the group, with the members treating each other’s families as their own. “We have 27 children between us,” notes Carol Reed, counting off the group’s progeny on her fingers. “There are also 22 grandchildren here, and five more on the way, including a set of triplets.”

Her pride is shared by the group. It is the kind of connection that can’t be manufactured.

“We’ve seen each other through births and babies, divorces and separations, illnesses, deaths of parents, the angsts of child-rearing, just through stripes and struggles in all sorts of areas,” Reed says.

“Some of us have lost husbands and got new ones, and some of us have lost our husbands and just left ‘em,” Reed quips, then adds, with a touch of humor but also truthfully, “Our husbands know their places. They are not a part of our group.”

**A**nd while that may be true, spousal contribution has indeed left its mark on the sisterhood.

“We were all over at my house one night, and my husband Steve had been eavesdropping,” Linda Erickson says. “So he was banned to the back of the house. Someone called for me while everyone was still there, and he told them, ‘Oh, you know, she’s with that stitch and bitch group.’ And it stuck. So now we refer to ourselves as the Sisterhood of the Stitch and Bitch.”

Going with the more vanilla “Sewing Circle” when talking about their group in mixed company, the ladies of the S and B quickly established such chemistry that they

would sew almost anything—from Halloween costumes to Adopt-A-Dolls, long after their children outgrew smocked clothing—just to be together.

Eventually their devotion to sewing fell by the wayside, by which time the group’s long-running annual beach trip became their mainstay.

“We have evolved in that area,” notes Erickson. “[At one point], we slept on blow-up beds in a house with one bathroom. We would pay \$20 a night and were just happy to be somewhere!”

The group has since graduated from those early rustic accommodations. Each year, they make their annual pilgrimage down to member Alice Chase’s Gulf Shores’ condo, often with more pajamas packed than bathing suits, for a gathering that is two parts reunion, one part summer camp.

“We realize we all talk at the same time, so we took a video camera to the beach and let this VHS tape run for 30 minutes or so,” Sue Grogan says. “We’d play it back and laugh. Even though everyone is talking at the same time, we know what everyone is saying. We don’t miss anything. So the next year we brought it back and looked at it again. Oops. Turned out it was a rental, from the year before.”

“I argued with the guy at the store because he told me we hadn’t returned the movie and I assured him we had,” Erickson adds. “I then had to call him back and say, ‘You might not remember me...’ to which he said, ‘Is it a bunch of old women talking?’ Someone had actually rented it and returned

it.”

For the ladies of the S and B, these beach weekends are much more than “a bunch of old women talking.”

“It’s an oasis,” says Erickson. “We cry together, but we laugh, too.”

Erickson recalls the year she called home early one Sunday morning to check in, only to hear her youngest daughter answer the phone with the words, “Daddy told me not to tell you, but I can’t keep it a secret.”

“Our dog had gotten hit by a car and died,” Erickson says. “My mother-in-law had also been ill recently. She’d gotten better but she was still struggling. And I said ‘Oh, honey, is she dead? Is Daddy OK?’ My back was to the group, and all they could hear was my side of the conversation. By the time I turned around, they were all wearing these looks of angst. They had started packing my suitcase and deciding who would drive me home. When I told them, ‘Daisy the Dog died,’ they all cracked up in relief!”

The ease with which they finish each other’s “Remember when?” moments, not to mention the sheer volume of those moments—accumulated over more than three decades of beach weekends and past-midnight soirees on school nights—is testament to just how deep a bond they share.

That bond was transformed profoundly in spring 2010, when longtime S and B member Jean Lollar learned she was facing a devastating breast cancer diagnosis.

“We all prayed for a miracle—and believed in it, except toward the end, when it became very evident that her miracle would

be something other than healing,” Grogan says. “The night before she died, we all went to the hospital, and we were granted some time with her because of her dear, sweet husband. He recognized it and knew it was important for us and for her. It was a precious time and it was a gift to know that we were allowed to have that final time with her.”

Later that night, from a lookout point at Vestavia Baptist, the women huddled together under quilts and raised their glasses of wine in a toast to the life of their dear friend.

Although certainly bittersweet, the S and B beach trip continues, as always, with an endless supply of peanut M&Ms (the group’s snack staple) and another weekend for making memories both poignant and saucy.

**L**est you be tempted to write them off as a bunch of quiet church ladies, be forewarned: This is the same group that wrote the phone number of one of their own on the wall of the Flora-Bama lounge when that member chose to stay in her room rather than get out and carouse with the locals.

Pranks aside, the group is fiercely loyal, a trait that has not gone unnoticed by second and third generations of the S and B.

“All of our children know how important we are to each other,” according to Erickson, who is touched by her own daughters’ referencing their close circle of friends as “my sewing group.”

“It’s really easy just to be,” Marie McElheny adds. “You don’t have to explain anything because everybody knows.” •

